Preservation of Southern Historical Documents[1]

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A FEW years ago I went to Louisville to meet a train and take Edward Weeks to Lexington, where he was to speak in the evening. On the way to Lexington, Mr. Weeks talked about the Southern Collection at the University of North Carolina. I was amazed to learn how much he knew about it, and I was pleased indeed to see his enthusiasm for the bold step that that institution had taken in developing it. Gathering materials for a university collection is a delicate undertaking, and the man who assumes such a job has to have the sense of humor of a clown, the patience of Job, and the integrity of Caesar's wife; and even then he will come home about half of the time branded a thief! I do not suppose there is any area of human relationships where well-meaning people can be more whimsical about a gentleman's agreement than in parting with family manuscripts.

Collecting historical records is possibly one of the most thrilling businesses a person can engage in, this side of swallowing fire, handling snakes at a Holy Roller meeting, or tracking down international spies. He can, within a short time, find himself in almost as many unanticipated situations as an imaginative who-done-it author could place him in. On one occasion in southern Kentucky I was on the hot trail of a set of records, and in the search I was told I would have to see an old gentleman who was lying ill in a nearby house. When I approached the door I was greeted in the most hushed manner and was ushered into the bedroom of a poor old emaciated gentleman who could hardly speak above a whisper and whose memory was even more faltering. I did get from him his consent for me to have the records. Actually, I was talking to a man lying literally on his death bed and already at the very threshold of eternity.

On another occasion I called at a very fine old southern mansion, surrounded with much of the moonlight and roses background.

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After I had virtually knocked the facing off of the front door, a slickly-shined black boy came out, dressed in a white coat drawn over work clothes, and asked me abruptly what I wanted. I told him I wished to see his mistress, and he replied, "Does you really want to see her?" When I said I really did, he took me around back of the house and up an outside set of stairs and into a bedroom where I found the good lady in a somewhat more than partial state of undress. This was the first day the boy in the white coat had served as houseman and he was terribly ignorant of the subject of white folks' social amenities.

Not all of the incidents of manuscript collecting, however, are associated with the cold hand of death or the embarrassment of standing in the bedroom of a partially dressed lady. Much of manuscript collection consists of tedious diplomacy and downright physical drudgery. But whatever it is, it requires a strong nerve and infinite patience.

The horror stories of southern manuscripts are not too good for either a collector's blood pressure or his peace of mind. I could write an eloquent story, I think, on the subject of the statement, "I burned that two years ago." Perhaps one story will suffice on this point. Some years ago when I was searching for records in Mississippi, a dear friend and college-mate of mine told me about an unusually fine collection of papers, which he was sure I could have. His description was so exciting that I persuaded him to get in the car with me and go that night to interview the owner. After driving over 20 miles of Mississippi gravel roads, we arrived at the gentleman's house and found him extremely hospitable. He confirmed my friend's statement that he had a great pile of letters and papers in a store attic, but it was so dark and the doorway to the attic was so treacherously located that he did not want to undertake climbing up there until daylight. He asked me to come back the next day and promised that I could have the papers. The next morning, as soon as it was daylight, I was on my way. We procured a ladder, opened the door in the gable end of the store, and climbed up. He went up first and just as he stuck his head in the opening he shouted, "I'll be damned." I knew it was useless for me to go farther; the tone of his voice reeked with bad news. Someone, unknown to him, had cleaned out the attic, and upon inquiry it was found that the old papers had been hauled off and burned.

Literally millions of pounds of papers have been destroyed either by fire or by being dumped into gullies to prevent erosion caused by the wasteful system of southern land usage. On one or two occa-

sions I have fished badly deteriorated papers out of waterlogged heaps in fields. But fire, rats, mice, and leaky roofs are minor enemies compared to maiden ladies and efficient housekeepers. A rat or a mouse can nibble away only enough paper to make a bed or cut a passage, but the good housekeeper's actions are almost invariably positive and final. Everything she cannot dust away with a mop, she burns. A few years ago I discovered that an intimate friend of mine, an excellent housekeeper but also the wife of a husband who had suddenly arrived at the doorway of literary fame, was burning his letters and papers. Fortunately she had, at the time of this discovery, burned only the first dribble of letters and practically none of his other papers; and I persuaded her to clutter up her house enough to keep the papers.

A new bride in an old house can play havoc with old wallpaper, woodwork, and furniture arrangement, and can cheerfully destroy the contents of old chests, trunks, and attics in general. When I read the society page on Sunday, I wonder how many manuscript burners there are in the weekly round-up! The new bride, who is out to display her housekeeping before her husband and her in-laws, is a cold, calculating creature with no sentiment about the "old things." All she wants to know is whether the stuff will burn.

But the maiden lady is an altogether different problem. She is most often the keeper of the sacred name and honor of the family, and her sense of these precious responsibilities becomes intensified with each succeeding year of single blessedness. People get the notion that their private letters will always carry the intimate connotations that they were meant to convey at the time they were written. There are few statements that will chill the manuscript collector like the one, "I just can't let you have Grandpa's and Grandma's old papers. They said such intimate things to each other." Or, the maiden ladies say, "There just might be something in them that we don't see that would disgrace us." This kind of egomania has prevented many a valuable paper from reaching the proper depository.

Family quarrels can result in some astounding decisions pertaining to papers, too. An impulsive brother or a hot-headed sister, fed up with the squabbling, throws the papers away or has them burned to settle the row. Nearly as bad, they may divide the records page by page until the the documents are so badly jumbled and scattered that only a patient sleuth can ever track them down or restore their original order. Sometimes, however, a family quarrel will play into the hands of a collector — if he arrives at the right moment.

I do want to pay tribute to the maiden lady to whom, perhaps, I have been unreasonably harsh. She is perhaps, after all, the biggest asset in preserving manuscripts. It is she who has clung to the old family papers. She has often preserved them as the living embodiments of her family, and many are the family collections which have been disposed of sensibly by the surviving female. It is she who knows where the papers are and what the family relations are, and who can recall many of the incidents that resulted in their creation.

It is an irony of fate that papers have a habit of getting into the hands of queer people. I have at least half a dozen notes in my desk at the moment telling me of the location of papers and bearing the trite admonition, "Be most tactful, because the owners are downright peculiar." Personally, I like them peculiar — because that means I will eventually get the papers! Everybody is in a certain sense peculiar; but I have found the owners of manuscripts are frequently just peculiar in the eyes of their neighbors, or merely peculiar on one subject, such as Presidential policies, local option, the income tax, or the right-of-way for a new road.

I recall once going to call about the second-most significant collection of papers I ever acquired. I was told by a brother of the man on whom I was to call that he himself would give me the papers but that he didn't know about his brother. In customary language he warned me, "That brother of mine is as curious as hell, and he may order you out of the house." I knocked timidly on the "curious" man's door, and a fog-horn bellow invited me to come in; the "prospect" was in bed. I went down a long hall to a bedroom door, and there lay the man in bed, with an evil-looking Colt forty-five strapped to a bedpost. I sat down and talked to the bed-ridden man for a few minutes. By accident I discovered that he had been a bank clerk in the little town where I went to high school, and in a few minutes we were talking about everybody and their bird dogs in the village. My getting the records became only incidental. My new-found friend told me that not only could I have the papers in the old storehouse, but also I might have his attic-full of papers if I could persuade his sister to help me get them.

Here I learned a little more fully a lesson that every manuscript collector should repeat to himself every day: Don't talk too much; and don't ask for everything in the first interview. When I went to see the sister she immediately raised that fateful question, "Do we want to let Papa's papers get into the hands of a stranger?" I went away for a few weeks to let the case cool off, and then I came back

to reopen it. This time I did my best at softening up the lady, and finally she consented to my taking the first set of records her brother had given me, but on what I considered a hard condition. The bulk of the records was large and my supply of pasteboard boxes limited. She said that a corpse was to arrive on the train at 4 o'clock and if I could pack the records and get away before it arrived, I could have them. That was the first time I was entered in a dead heat with a corpse, but the fact that the corpse had no choice and was traveling on the Southern Railway was a most fortunate break for me. Just as the belated train came into sight I was getting into my car, with the bills of lading in my pocket.

Frequently a man with a local reputation for being "curious" is only cantankerous. I once went to see an old gentleman whose father had been most active in the affairs of his community in middle Tennessee. His son had preserved his records in barrels and boxes stored in an outhouse. They were, nevertheless, in good condition; and, more important, they were complete so far as I could tell. He let me have the papers without much tedious discussion, but before I could get back to the University of Kentucky, he wrote the comptroller a letter that seemed to indicate that if I were not a thief I was in at least an advanced embryo stage of becoming one. When we were able to satisfy him that I was able to walk about Lexington in the daylight and that his records had arrived safely, he seemed to be satisfied. Later, after the papers were cataloged and filed, he wrote us to return them. We shipped the papers back immediately, and I again called on the old gentleman. He said that I could have the papers — that he had only wanted to see if we would return them. I overloaded my car with these papers and drove over most of middle Tennessee during an express company strike before I could get an office to ship them. But — woe unto us — the old gentleman asked for his papers a second time, and so far as I know they are now back in the outhouse!

There are many depositories of private papers. Sometimes these depositories may be the least suspected ones. The average courthouse is often a catch-all for community records. People bring papers in for clerks and local politicians to see, or they leave their private papers in the vaults and forget them. Sometimes papers are brought in for trials but are not filed with the official records. Sifting through a set of county records in a courthouse that has not had a fire is often rewarding. We have found in these depositories papers that no one knew existed. It is often true that one of the clerks, especially the clerk of the circuit court, becomes interested

in local history; he gathers in masses of materials and goes out of office and forgets them. In almost every aspect of the handling of official records, the southern counties have been exceedingly careless. They have stuffed them away in attics, crammed them into wet and cluttered basements, and — even worse — stored them away in jails infested with disease and vermin.

State records in many instances have been little better handled. Several of the States have hauled out and dumped papers that should have been cared for in fireproof depositories. As a specific instance, no one will know how many valuable papers were destroyed when the Kentucky State government moved from one side of the Kentucky River to the other. To hear the old timers tell it, the river ran full with books and papers that were dumped into it. Years later the departmental records of Kentucky were being sold for scrap paper. Two truck loads had already been hauled to Louisville to a waste-paper dealer's warehouse when the governor ordered them returned and deposited in the University of Kentucky Library. Some of the States have avoided such travesty by providing adequate buildings for archives. Many public agencies, however, produce records that are deposited far from the main centers of State activity and that, because of this fact, are often destroyed or forgotten.

The great volume of church and religious records frequently receives most careless handling. Possibly some of the most interesting volumes of manuscripts are the early records of church membership and the minutes of the meetings of the deacons, stewards, or vestrymen. These are scattered in the homes of the clerks and secretaries. I believe that the few complete sets of intact church records are the exception rather than the rule. An interesting set of papers pertaining to one religious group are the Shaker papers. The known papers are scattered all the way from New York to Lewisburg, Kentucky. One day, while buying stamps in the village post office at Lewisburg, I explained to the postmistress that I was in search of manuscript material, and she told me that her family had a small leather box of Shaker records. Her husband had attended a sale at the abandoned South Union settlement and had bought for a mere pittance the papers that incoming converts deposited with the Shaker elders. They were valuable economic papers, pertaining largely to the trade southward down the river. Another set of Shaker papers was found in a bank vault at Harrodsburg, where they had come to rest after the dissolution of the order at Mount Pleasant.

Just as the scattered religious records involve a long and tedious job of reassembling, so do southern economic records. When businesses cease operation their old records are left to gather dust and worms in the old buildings or are packed away in warehouses. Mercantile businesses are suspended, and their account books and papers are left in the old stores. Trunks buried under household and business debris contain rich finds of letters and other manuscript materials. Businesses, like county courthouses, have had a way of collecting many records which have little or no direct association with their specific interests. I have found large numbers of invaluable personal and community papers mixed in with store records. Some of them got there because of the merchants' interests in local affairs, and others got there by some accident of community life.

The papers of southern literary men have not been too well collected. We in Kentucky have had difficulty in bringing together the papers of James Lane Allen and John Fox, Jr. Although we shall perhaps never be able to complete the task, we have gone a long way toward this completion. I should like also to suggest that publishers — at least those who have not had fires — possess enormous amounts of correspondence and manuscript materials from authors, and it is my impression that they have not yet made up their minds what they should do with these papers. A careful listing and canvassing of these depositories, in my opinion, would have pleasant results. The South Atlantic Modern Language Association is at present engaged in the undertaking of cataloging the literary papers of the South. It cannot get far, however, until it has searched publishers' files.

It is interesting to note that so ardent a group of manuscript collectors and preservers as the southern historians do not yet have in a single file their semiofficial papers. In years to come, when a scholar sets out to track down the most important collections of records pertaining to the publication activities of the Southern Historical Association, he will have to call on the widows Stephenson, Cole, Binkley, England, and Clark to find out what has gone on. There is no collected file of these papers.

In the last 3 decades there have developed in the South several university presses of genuine importance. They have carried on extensive correspondence of major importance in the field of scholarship. Although it is true that they have done little so-called "creative" publishing, they have published a solid backlog of the more serious materials pertaining to the South. So far as I am able to

determine, nothing has been done to collect their files, and I suspect that in a few cases these have been destroyed.

The same thing is true of newspaper records. I do not know of a single manuscript collection in the South pertaining to a major newspaper. If there is such a thing, it is probably unique. Magazines fall into the same category, and with one or two exceptions so do the records of book publishers. Between the hours of 3 and 6 o'clock on one cold Sunday morning in 1947, I rode, seated between two drowsy but burly colored brothers, to Louisville in a Kentucky University truck to rescue the papers of the famous old publishing house of John P. Morton and Sons. Fortunately we did rescue most of the records of this house, but the manner in which we did it was harrowing. We had to fight off waste-paper dealers while we crammed papers into boxes and sacks, without having a minute's time to canvass the whole collection to make sure we were doing a thorough job. I worked almost 15 hours getting these papers together; and the University of Kentucky Library is the wealthier for these records, which represent a significant chapter of book publishing and sales for the South from about 1840 to 1920.

The whole field of southern business records lies almost untouched. Who can write intelligently of southern agricultural progress, or the lack of it, without first examining the records of the Lynchburg Plow Co., the Chattanooga Plow Co., and Benjamin Franklin Avery and Sons of Louisville? The important textile records, I am sure, lie scattered in the junk-rooms of the mills, or have been destroyed altogether. On one or two occasions, the Baker Library at Harvard has called our attention to valuable textile records in Tennessee. It is true that the whole field of business manuscripts is broad and diverse, but it is time that at least one southern university should give serious attention to the collection of these records and to their housing in a building large enough, with a staff adequate enough to do the necessary collecting and arranging. This will be a somewhat expensive undertaking, and the bulk of the records will indeed be great, but who can say that they are not important? Perhaps it is not too dreamy-eyed to hope that southern business executives may contribute both money and records to the creation of a centralized industrial archives. With the rise of industrialism in the region, business records will soon become of major importance in the field of southern economics and history. Their collection is a "must" on some university's list of things to do to place it in a favored position as a research center of the future. These records are, fortunately, not too hard to collect. At least

the companies are easily located, and in my opinion business men would be no more difficult to convince of the importance of preserving their records than maiden ladies and "curious" men.

The South has come a long way in 50 years in the preservation of its records. It would take too much time to belabor the facts of what to you must be the obvious places where these advances have been made. Most States have archival departments that are aggressive in varying degrees. Most universities are becoming somewhat aware of the great rewards that await them in the field of manuscript materials within their communities, and even private historical societies are much more active than before. The efforts and encouragement of older scholars and collectors are now bearing fruit in the fine crop of young scholars in many fields of interest, who are industriously digging into the South's records of the past for answers to many questions of significant meaning for the present. No one doubts at the moment that southern scholarship is a going thing, but it cannot mature as it must without strong library and archival support.

Possibly there has never been a time in southern history when it was more important to be about the business of collecting records than now. As I have said, there is a growing scholarly demand for the materials, and the South itself is rushing headlong into a major industrial era. Old homes are being cut up into efficiency apartments or destroyed to make room for industrial developments. Towns and country villages are growing faster than ever before, and there is less and less space in private depositories for the retention of family papers. The older generation, which had a close secondary tie-up with the Old South, is rapidly passing from the scene; and the papers that have been preserved are falling into younger hands. Many of these young people are indifferent to these source materials — either because they are no longer masters of their own fate, owing to calls to the armed services, or because they are forced to move to the crowded communities of defense industries.

On the other hand, we are in an age of the silliest kind of commercialization of our history. Every tourist camp, soft-drink stand, roadside park, and antique shop has to collect its stock of local historical materials to offer the omnivorous peanut-crunching, drink-gulping tourist a bait to stop by to see the snakes, buy plaster of Paris horrors, and read Grandpappy's letters. Even *Life* and *Look* magazines have given what, in my opinion, is most unfortunate publicity to manuscript finds. These articles serve no good purpose; they erect serious barriers to the intelligent collection and preserva-

tion of vital historical materials. During these flush times of inflation private collectors have multiplied by the hundred, and they go about the land gathering up everything from buttons to letters. They have successfully combed many collections, sometimes taking selected letters or, much worse, sometimes snipping off autographs. A few of these collectors will be intelligent enough to leave their treasure troves to their old schools or to dignify their own names by establishing collections in some institution which suggests their making such gifts.

It seems to me of major importance that universities which hope to become important centers of scholarship should make great efforts to collect everything of pertinency around them. For 20 years I have carried on a continuous argument with two university presidents on the subject of employing a full-time collector to gather up the manuscript materials of Kentucky that are going to the waste-paper mill every year. The two presidents I have dealt with have been fine gentlemen and generous-minded administrators, but my pleas have not made enough impression to date for us to save any considerable volume of manuscripts. Neither president has had to be "sold" on the idea; but both of them have felt, I am sure, that such a proposal was unorthodox and should wait for the future and for greater financial resources. I wish to praise the University of North Carolina without reservation for its intelligent approach to this problem. That university has built a permanent asset which will endure as long as southern civilization holds together, and students yet unborn will bless the decision of the administration that dared to be unorthodox and encourage the collecting of so rich a storehouse of materials.

At this point I wish to pay tribute to three southerners because I feel a close kinship with them. One whom I never saw, Stephen B. Weeks of Trinity College, seems to have known something of the importance of historical records and to have begun a modest collection. I am sure he was a historian who was "on fire." The other two men have been my good friends, I have held both of them in warmest affection, and they have set an ideal for me. The first was William K. "Tubby" Boyd, who had both a genuine sense of the value of the original records and the energy and imagination to collect them. The other is Professor J. G. deRoulhac Hamilton. From my days as a graduate student I have greatly admired Dr. Hamilton. He has distinguished himself as one of the South's most ardent and valuable sons. Seldom has it been the fortune of a man to be both so able a historian and so magnificent a collector. In my hum-

ble opinion Dr. Hamilton has reached invaluable goals in the South. The extraordinarily fine Southern Collection at the University of North Carolina will stand as a monument long after that charming gentleman has had at least three flings at trying to beg away from Saint Peter all the records pertaining to his admission of southerners from 1606 to 1890. But it will not be the Southern Collection alone, fine as it is, that will get him into a position to annoy Saint Peter. It will be the activities of that multitude of once lackadaisical southern defeatists, who sat by and allowed their records to go to the gullies, the rats, the brides, and Chicago. When Dr. Hamilton came along and gathered up enough of their papers to make them infernally mad, they got busy and are now doing something on their home grounds. No one can estimate the money that he cost the States of Alabama, South Carolina, Georgia, and Virginia alone by forcing them to wake up and collect and service their records.

There are still those whining, petulant people who cry in a weary refrain, "He robbed us." He did not rob anybody but the rats and the flames; he saved from destruction many of their choicest historical records. It is the same dull and tiresome chorus that has sung a dirge for Lyman Draper all these years. The South's historical records are more secure tonight than ever before in the region's history largely because Dr. Hamilton had the energy, plus the personal magnetism, to go out and persuade the owners of records to dispose of them intelligently. He has been a noble pioneer indeed, who opened vast spaces in the wilderness of southern manuscript collecting and preservation. But there are still smokehouses, attics, and abandoned buggy-sheds where he did not disturb the dust; and it is imperative that many institutions work vigorously at building his monument higher by gathering within their depositories as complete a record of southern civilization as it is possible to assemble.